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SIPDIS

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WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
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PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO
E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: IS KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Mideast

Key stories in the media:

All media bannered Israel's current and expected response to Hamas-led terrorism. The media reported that PM Sharon has ordered the assassination of Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders. Yediot quoted senior security sources as saying that they are "in the crosshairs." Leading media reported that last night the IDF started operations throughout the Gaza Strip. Israel Radio quoted Palestinian sources as saying that two Palestinians were killed, including a member of the Popular Resistance Committees, and that seven others were wounded, one of them critically. Leading media reported that two Palestinians were killed Tuesday in an IAF helicopter attack in Gaza City, and that IDF operations in the Strip are continuing today. Ha'aretz reported that top Fatah activists are leaving the movement to join Hamas.

Ha'aretz reported that security officials are considering preempting any legal entanglements by speeding up the construction of the separation fence. Israel Radio reported that today the High Court of Justice will debate four separate petitions related to the erection of the fence.

Ha'aretz assesses that Syria is likely to be hit hard by a restriction in U.S. investments. Jerusalem Post quoted sources in Washington as saying Tuesday that the Bush administration is expected to prohibit American energy companies from future investments in Syria, but allow some already existing projects to continue, as part of fresh U.S. sanctions to be unveiled in the coming days. Ha'aretz reported on an individual initiative: following his visit to Israel in November 2002, New York City Comptroller William Thompson, received the consent of the shareholders in the pension fund of the NYC policemen and firemen to approach large American companies in which the pension fund invests, to stop their activities in Syria and Iran. Ha'aretz also featured the Syrian media's efforts "to deny the reality of a nearby country" (Israel).

Israel Radio cited Al Jazeera-TV that today Osama El-Baz, senior adviser to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, is due to meet with PA Chairman Yasser Arafat and that El-Baz is carrying a special message from Mubarak.

Ha'aretz and Jerusalem Post quoted Jordanian officials as saying that Jordan is considering suing Israel over the money seized from Ramallah banks in February. Jordan claims that the funds belong to Jordanians. Yediot reported that the Foreign Ministry is embarking on an international campaign against the deadly abuse of Palestinian children by the Palestinian terrorist groups. Ma'ariv and Hatzofe reported that Abdullah Quran, the 10 to 12-year old boy (depending on the media) arrested Monday with explosives at a checkpoint near Nablus, received five shekels (about 1 USD) for the errand he was sent on. Ma'ariv quoted Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Gideon Ezra (Likud) as saying that Israeli Arabs should be recruited in protection efforts against suicide bombers, whom they will recognize more efficiently than the average Israeli Jew.

Yediot reported that Tuesday A/G Menachem Mazuz confirmed to Meretz Knesset Member Zahava Gal-On a

Ha'aretz story that the Shin Bet maintains a "blacklist" of left-wing activists because of the concern that they could become, albeit unwillingly, accessories to the activities of terror organizations. Leading media also quoted Mazuz as saying that the disengagement plan could cause a rift among Israelis.

Most media reported that last night, with a 54 to 46-percent margin, Yossi Beilin won the contest for the leadership of Yahad, the successor party to Meretz, over Knesset Member Ran Cohen, who is more identified with social issues.

Ha'aretz reported that Iran and Egypt will operate separate reconnaissance satellites in one to two years.

Ha'aretz reported on events held across the U.S. to mark the first anniversary of the death of American peace activist Rachel Corrie, who was crushed to death by an Israeli military bulldozer as she attempted to prevent the destruction of a Palestinian house in Rafah. Rachel's father Craig Corrie was quoted as saying in an interview with Ha'aretz: "I believe that the Israeli government has had every chance over the past year to do what Prime Minister Sharon promised President Bush in their conversation on March 17, 2003." Ha'aretz notes that according to the State Department, the gist of that conversation was that the GOI would carry out a comprehensive, full, and transparent investigation and report back to the U.S. on its findings.

Ha'aretz reported that local residents are planning a dual language, Jewish-Arab school in the Wadi Ara area (between Hadera and Afula).

Jerusalem Post cited an AP story that the U.S. Justice Department has hardened its position on a Holocaust lawsuit claiming the U.S. Army plundered riches seized by Nazis from 800,000 Hungarian Jews and covered it up for decades.

Mideast:

Summary:

Chief Economic Editor and senior columnist Sever Plotker wrote in the lead editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "We cannot-- either morally or politically -- drown Gaza either in the sea or in blood. But Arafat can be expelled."

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "The new installations are part of a comprehensive British-Palestinian security plan.... The American go-ahead for British involvement was granted reluctantly and on a limited basis, and only after Blair's personal appeal to President Bush."

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "This is not 'just' child abuse, but child sacrifice. It is as if Palestinian terrorists are trying to reach new depths of war crimes."

Former director-general of the Prime Minister's Office and the Foreign Ministry Avraham Tamir wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "History will chronicle the unilateral disengagement ... as a necessary transition period in the peace process, in accordance with President Bush's road map principles."

Block Quotes:

I. "Going to Gaza"

Chief Economic Editor and senior columnist Sever Plotker wrote in the lead editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (March 17): "The most recent wave of terror attacks by Hamas was launched to prove that Israel is withdrawing from Gaza because of Ashdod, that Al Qaida's 'Madrid method' (terror prompts withdrawal) has met with success here as well. Israel, in response, has decided to purge Gaza of Hamas and to deal Hamas a deathblow.... There can be no disputing the need to pay Hamas back what it duly deserves. However, the root of all evil does not lie with this terror organization. Hamas is capable of launching such a large scope of terror attacks against Israel only because it is backed by Palestinian militias that are loyal to Arafat. Arafat perceives Hamas to be his long-range strategic arm. He

wants to be cast as the liberator of Gaza. As such, as long as Arafat is around, it is doubtful that the Israeli withdrawal will take place. And it is also doubtful whether the blow being dealt to Hamas -- lethal as it may be -- will achieve its desired goals. We cannot-- either morally or politically -- drown Gaza either in the sea or in blood. But Arafat can be expelled."

II. "The British Are Here, With Arafat's Approval"

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in independent, left-leaning *Ha'aretz* (March 17): "With grudging consent from the Americans, the British are now setting up two new operation control rooms, one in Ramallah and one in Gaza, for Palestinian security organizations.... What is the reason for the British involvement? Aside from a desire to wield influence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the British are afraid that implementation of the disengagement plan could lead to Palestinian loss of control in the territories to be evacuated, and to ensuing chaos. Essentially, the new installations are part of a comprehensive British-Palestinian security plan.... The American go-ahead for British involvement was granted reluctantly and on a limited basis, and only after Blair's personal appeal to President Bush.... The reasons for the Americans' and the Israelis' unwillingness to cooperate with the Palestinians on this issue are basically identical: Arafat's direct involvement in implementing the plan, and his condition that nothing happen without his say-so.... If and when the disengagement begins, we will begin to see increasingly more involvement of foreign countries in the area.... Because the withdrawal is unilateral and not in the framework of an agreement, it is doubtful that Israel could prevent the Palestinians from steps such as inviting international representatives, unless the step could be considered as an act of war."

III. "Child Sacrifice"

Conservative, independent *Jerusalem Post* editorialized (March 17): "Israel was shaken Monday. It wasn't because of a terrorist atrocity actually perpetrated, but because of one thankfully preempted. Front pages were dominated by the story of 11-year-old Abdullah Quran, who carried a powerful bomb in his schoolbag.... This is not 'just' child abuse, but child sacrifice. It is as if Palestinian terrorists are trying to reach new depths of war crimes, matched only by previous uses of ambulances and pregnant women to carry out terrorist attacks.... Incredibly, Abdullah's misadventure went largely unreported by the world's media, further underscoring the double standard against Israel.... The Palestinian manipulation of children is as pervasive and transparent as Hitler's 'Children's Army' at the end of World War II. It's a flagrant violation of Article 38 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which censures 'the recruitment and involvement of children under 15 in hostilities and armed conflicts.' Yet it's an entrenched Arab practice in this country.... Palestinian youngsters are incessantly subjected to brainwashing in the media and classroom. Hate is inculcated in them. Even preschoolers are taught to aspire to martyr status. They grow in a culture that, rather than consecrating life, glorifies violent 'sacrificial' death."

IV. "Disengagement as Strategic Need"

Former director-general of the Prime Minister's Office and the Foreign Ministry Avraham Tamir wrote in popular, pluralist *Maariv* (March 17): "History will chronicle the unilateral disengagement, in accordance with the principles of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, as a necessary transition period in the peace process, in accordance with President Bush's road map principles.... Sharon's disengagement plan will earn broad national support in Israel; the duration of a national unity government, even if extremist factions leave it because of the connection with the goals of the road map; U.S. support and assistance for relocating a civilian and military infrastructure; the support of Egypt and Jordan to the only way of preparing the ground for the implementation of the road map; and the support of the European Union, the Russian Federation, the Secretary-General of the UN and key Arab and Muslim countries. The scope of that support will have repercussions on change in the Palestinian government toward a determination to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure, to stop hostile operations and to sever connections with international terrorist organizations such as Hizbullah and Al Qaida.... Sharon's disengagement plan ... would have implications

for the advancement of a comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace, in which a diplomatic and security solution would be found to all the components of a conflict that has lasted since time immemorial."

KURTZER